

**Original citation:**

Tania ap Siôn, (2017) Religious experience among Catholic and Protestant sixth-form students in Northern Ireland : looking for signs of the presence of God. Mental Health, Religion and Culture.

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/84666>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Mental Health, Religion and Culture. on 22/03/2017 available online:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1279131>

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)

**Religious experience among Catholic and Protestant sixth-form students in  
Northern Ireland: Looking for signs of the presence of God**

Tania ap Siôn\*

Associate Professor in Education and the Social Significance of Religion, Warwick  
Religions and Education Research Unit, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.

*\*Correspondence*

Dr Tania ap Siôn

St Mary's Centre

Llys Onnen

Abergwyngregyn

Gwynedd

Wales, UK

LL33 0LD

*e-mail*            t.ap-sion@warwick.ac.uk

*web site*        www.st-marys-centre.org

## **ABSTRACT**

John Greer conducted major surveys of sixth-form religion in Protestant schools in Northern Ireland in 1968, 1978, and 1988. John Greer's colleagues continued that research tradition in Northern Ireland in 1998 and in 2010, and extended the survey to include sixth-form students in Catholic schools. Greer's survey routinely included a question on religious experience, drawing on the approach of Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Research Unit. The 2010 survey provided the data from around 1,500 sixth-form students analysed in the present paper. These new data offer two main points of contrast, between students in Catholic and in Protestant schools, and between students in 1998 and 2010. The analysis preserves Greer's historic descriptive categories of religious experience styled: help and guidance, exams, God's presence, answered prayer, death, sickness, conversion, miscellaneous, and difficulty in describing.

**Keywords:** Religious experience, adolescents, Northern Ireland, Catholic, Protestant.

## INTRODUCTION

The present study is set within the Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Research Unit tradition of exploring religious experience. With a background shaped by scientific enquiry and method as a biologist, Hardy sought to ‘bridge’ evolutionary science and spiritual experience (Fox, 2014: 22), and his interest lay in scientifically recording and analysing responses to the question:

Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?

Respondents were asked to include details concerning age, sex, nationality, religious background and any other factors considered relevant. The request was posted in the national press and magazines as well as promoted through the media. By the end of the 1970s, over 4,000 responses to this question had been placed in the archive of the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford (Hardy, 1979: 1) and many of the accounts had been placed within useful categories.

Early studies drawing on the accounts of religious experience within the archive of the Religious Experience Research Unit, including Beardsworth (1977) and Robinson (1977a, 1977b, 1978), drew attention to the widespread persistence of religious experiences in what was otherwise thought to be an increasingly secular context. The relationship between religious experiences during childhood and adolescence and an affirmative response to the Hardy question was one of the major early findings to emerge from the study of the religious experience accounts in the archive. For example, Edward Robinson’s (1977a) *The Original Vision* comments on the number of reports which began with a clear recollection from childhood. More recent studies drawing on accounts of religious experience within the archive of the Religious

Experience Research Unit also support this connection, albeit located in more specific thematic contexts. For example, Mark Fox's (2014) *The Fifth Love: Exploring accounts of the extraordinary* includes a number of records relating to religious and spiritual experiences occurring during childhood and adolescence within a collection of over 150 accounts of experiences of intense, transcendental love. In addition, of almost 400 accounts of encounters with strange lights reported by Fox (2008) in *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Lightforms*, a few related to childhood and adolescence. Other research studies support and explore this relationship further. For example, Farmer (1992) made a study of 'adult perspectives' on religious experience in childhood, and Scott (2004) concentrated on 'retrospective spiritual narratives', exploring recalled childhood and adolescent spiritual experiences.

In spite of the importance of childhood and adolescence in shaping apparent receptivity to religious experience, as demonstrated by the Hardy research tradition, comparatively little attention has been given to researching religious experience among school students. The notable exceptions are provided by Elkind and Elkind (1962), Paffard (1973), Hoge and Smith (1982), Miles (1983), Robinson and Jackson (1987), and a set of studies reported by Greer (1981, 1982), Greer and Francis (1992), Francis and Greer (1993, 1999), and ap Siôn (2006).

In a study entitled 'Varieties of religious experience in young adolescents', Elkind and Elkind (1962) found that a high percentage of a group of 144 high school students in the United States of America had 'recurrent' and 'acute' experiences in which they felt close to God. In a study subtitled 'transcendental experiences in childhood and adolescence', Paffard (1973) produced evidence of the common occurrence of

transcendental experience among 400 sixth-form students and undergraduates in England. Hoge and Smith (1982) asked a sample of 451 Catholic, Baptist and Methodist grade-ten students in the United States of America about definitive religious experiences in their lives, and 58% reported them. Such experiences usually took place at a retreat or camp or in a church service. In a doctoral project concerned with 'adolescents' attitudes to and understanding of transcendental experience', Miles (1983) undertook a detailed study among 137 sixth-form students in England to test three hypotheses: that transcendental experience forms an element in the experiences of adolescents; that teaching can improve students' understanding of transcendental experience; and that understanding improves students' attitudes toward transcendental experience. Comparisons were made between a group of 82 students who followed a taught programme about transcendental experience and a control group of 55 students. Robinson and Jackson (1987) conducted a wide-ranging questionnaire survey among 6,576 students from the age of 16 upwards in the United Kingdom for a study they styled *Religion and Values at 16+*, which included measures of numinous experience and mystical experience. In an empirical study among children and adolescents in Finland, *Religious Development in Childhood and Youth*, Tamminen (1991) included an important section on religious experience, which he defines as 'experience to which a sense of dependency on or connection with God/the divine and the transcendent is connected' (p. 34). Two surveys conducted in 1974 and 1986 employed the two following key questions: Have you at times felt that God is particularly close to you?; Have you at times felt that God is guiding, directing your life? Each question provided opportunity to describe the experience.

Of all these studies, however, Greer's research relating to religious experience and

adolescence is of particular interest for two reasons. The first reason is that the research was conducted in Northern Ireland which is not only an especially religious context, but also one which is significantly divided between Protestant and Catholic communities (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Barnes, 2005a, 2005b). Greer's research was conducted within both Protestant and Catholic schools. The second reason is that Greer's programme of research has employed the same question in a series of studies among well-defined cross-sectional samples of secondary school students. These studies have consistently included the question: 'Have you ever had an experience of God, eg his presence or his help or anything else?'

Greer's first study employing this question was conducted in 1978 among 1,872 upper sixth-form students at controlled or Protestant voluntary schools. In his report of this study Greer (1981) found that 38% of the males and 51% of the females gave a positive response to his religious experience question. Greer employed the question for the second time in 1981 among 940 Catholic and 1,193 Protestant students between the ages of 12 and 17 attending 19 secondary and grammar schools. According to Greer (1982) this time the answer 'yes' was given to the religious experience question by 31% of the Protestant males, 39% of the Protestant females, 35% of the Catholic males and 64% of the Catholic females. In this study Greer found no significant age differences in the proportions of students who reported religious experience.

Greer employed the question for the third time in 1984 among 1,177 fourth-, fifth- and sixth-form students from ten Protestant and ten Catholic schools. According to Francis and Greer (1993) this time the answer 'yes' was given by 26% of the

Protestant males, 38% of the Protestant females, 34% of the Catholic males and 56% of the Catholic females. Greer employed the question for the fourth time during the school year 1991–1992 among 2,129 third-, fourth-, fifth- and sixth-form students attending 12 Protestant and 12 Catholic grammar schools. According to Francis and Greer (1999) this time the answer ‘yes’ was given by 37% of the Protestant males, 56% of the Protestant females, 49% of the Catholic males and 61% of the Catholic females. The question was employed for a fifth time during the 1998 survey of sixth-form students attending Protestant schools and Catholic schools. According to ap Sion (2006), this time the answer ‘yes’ was given by 29% of males in Protestant schools, 39% of females in Protestant schools, 29% of males in Catholic schools, and 38% of females in Catholic schools.

In the three studies conducted in 1978, 1981, 1998 students who gave the answer ‘yes’ to the Greer religious experience question were also invited to ‘describe this experience if you can’. In the 1978 study 28% of the students accepted the invitation to describe their religious experience, in the 1981 study 31% did so, and in 1998 study 23% did so. The first two analyses reported by Greer (1981, 1982) attempted to categorise these descriptions of religious experience within discrete groups. Greer (1981) proposed nine categories which he characterised as: guidance and help, examinations, depression and sickness, death, answered prayer, God’s presence, conversion experiences, good experiences, and miscellaneous. Greer (1982) reduced the number of categories to eight by eliminating the category ‘good experience’. Greer fully recognised the arbitrary and problematic process of attempting to assign each account to one category. The third analysis by ap Sion (2006) relating to the 1998 survey, employed both Greer’s eight category framework as well as a



modification of it. The modification was two-fold. In the first instance, a new category was added to Greer's framework styled as 'difficulty in describing', which reduced the number of accounts falling into the 'miscellaneous' category. In the second instance, each brief account was coded in up to two of the religious experience categories (rather than the one category allowed for in the original Greer framework). The coding modification revealed more accurately the prevalence of accounts within two categories in particular: help and guidance, and answered prayer.

### **Research agenda**

Against this background the aim of the present study was to replicate in the 2010 survey Greer's earlier research in relation to the religious experience question. In the intervening years since the studies conducted in 1978, 1981 and 1998 a number of commentators had begun to suggest that the religious climate of Northern Ireland was undergoing considerable change. Although self-expressed religious affiliation remained high and religious practice remained high, especially within the Catholic community, studies like Mitchell's (2005) qualitative research conducted in 2000 suggested that religious affiliation and religious practice in Northern Ireland were functioning largely as vehicles to convey social and cultural identity rather than to signify real religious belief or commitment to faith. An enquiry into how young people in Northern Ireland respond to Greer's religious experience question and into the extent to which they continue to volunteer to provide descriptions of religious experience may provide a good test of the extent to which the religious climate of Northern Ireland has or has not undergone profound change during that thirty year period. The analysis of the data in the current study will focus on two main points of contrast: first, between students in Catholic and in Protestant schools, and second,

between students in 1998 and 2010.

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure**

For the 2010 survey, staff within a random sample of seven Protestant schools (including a single-sex school for girls only) and eleven Catholic schools (including single-sex schools for girls only and boys only) were invited to administer the research instrument to their lower and upper sixth-form students. The questionnaires were administered by teachers according to a standardised procedure, which emphasised confidentiality, anonymity, and the option of not participating and gave the assurance that the responses would not be read by school staff.

### **Instrument**

Alongside a full range of questions concerned with the dimensions of religious affiliation, belief, and practice, the questionnaire included Greer's (1981, 1982) question concerned with religious experience: 'Have you ever had an experience of God, eg his presence or his help or anything else?' This question was followed by dichotomous response categories: yes and no. Those students who checked the positive response were then given the following invitation: 'Please describe this experience if you can.'

### **Participants**

The present analyses were conducted on data submitted by 1,468 students, 647 of whom were attending Protestant schools (207 males and 440 females) and 821

attending Catholic schools (406 males and 415 females).

## **Analysis**

Greer's (1982) original research identified eight main categories of religious experience in the responses to the religious experience question: help and guidance, exams, sickness, death, answered prayer, God's presence, conversion and miscellaneous. In the analysis of the religious experience question in the 1998 replication of Greer's survey, ap Siôn (2006) employed both Greer's framework and a modification of Greer's framework in order to respond to two main shortcomings which were identified in the original framework. The first shortcoming related to application of the framework: in Greer's original analyses of religious experience each written religious experience could be allocated to only one category, which did not take account of the religious experiences falling into more than one category. The second shortcoming related to the range of categories included in the framework; in Greer's original study a large number of responses fell into the miscellaneous category, indicating that the framework was not coping with the diversity present in the religious experience descriptions. As a result of these perceived shortcomings, a modified analytical framework was constructed and employed in the analysis; this allowed each described religious experience to be placed in up to two categories and included an additional category named 'difficulty in describing', which included responses which indicated an inability, difficulty, or unwillingness to describe a religious experience.

As this study of religious experience is part of a longitudinal survey, the current analysis of responses to the religious experience question in the 2010 survey employs

both the original Greer (1982) analytical framework and ap Siôn's (2006) modified framework.

Two additional characteristics of the reported religious experiences were measured in the analysis for the first time. First, it was noted whether the religious experience was described as being located explicitly in a 'religious setting' (for example, in a church, at Eucharist, or church-related group event). Second, it was noted whether the response described religious experience as something which was 'constant or always present', 'occurring on more than one occasion', or 'occurring on one specific occasion'. This was an attempt to try to capture an aspect of religious experience in which Hardy appeared to be interested but did not generally access in his archive – that is, accounts of 'a continuing feeling of a transcendental reality or of a divine presence' (Fox, 2014: 23) in contrast with singular more dramatic experiences.

Lastly, the results of the 2010 survey were compared with the results of the 1998 survey (ap Siôn, 2006).

## **RESULTS**

### **Overview**

Overall 445 (30%) of the students reported that they had recognised at some time in their life an experience of God. The level of reported religious experience varied according to sex and according to denomination: religious experience was reported by 58 (28%) of males in Protestant schools, 85 (21%) of males in Catholic schools, 171 (39%) of females in Protestant schools and 131 (32%) of females in Catholic schools.

Overall 311 (21%) of the students then proceeded to provide a description of religious experience. The proportions of the students who proceeded to describe their religious experience also varied according to denomination and according to sex: among those who reported religious experiences, these experiences were described by 34 (59%) of males and 115 (67%) of females in Protestant schools and by 58 (68%) of males and 104 (79%) of females in Catholic schools.

### **Categorising religious experience**

The first phase of data analysis employed content analysis to locate each of the 311 described religious experiences within one category of Greer's (1982) original framework. This methodology generated the following hierarchy of categories: help and guidance 75 (24%), God's presence 64 (21%), sickness 52 (17%), exams 47 (15%), death 25 (8%), answered prayer 24 (7%), miscellaneous 15 (5%), and conversion 9 (3%). Table 1 illustrates how these categories varied according to sex and denomination.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The second phase of data analysis employed content analysis to locate each of the 311 described religious experiences within up to two categories of the modified framework (ap Siôn, 2006). This methodology generated the following hierarchy of categories: God's presence: 82 (26%), help and guidance 80 (26%), answered prayer 72 (23%), sickness 56 (18%), exams 47 (15%), death 29 (9%), miscellaneous 15 (5%), conversion 9 (3%), and difficulty in describing 1 (0.32%). Table 2 illustrates how these categories varied according to sex and denomination.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The analysis of the additional characteristics of the reported religious experiences produced the following results. First, of the 311 described religious experiences, 21 (7%) were placed in an explicitly religious setting. Second, of the 311 reported religious experiences, 20 (6%) referred to religious experience as ‘constant or always present’, 148 (48%) as ‘occurring on more than one occasion’, and 143 (46%) as ‘occurring on one specific occasion’. Table 3 illustrates how these characteristics varied according to sex and denomination.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

### **Comparing the results with 1998 survey**

When the results of the 2010 survey were compared with the quantitative results emerging from the 1998 survey a number of similarities and differences were apparent. Overall, the proportion of students reporting that they had recognised at some time in their life an experience of God is similar in the 1998 survey (33%) and the 2010 survey (30%), and this similarity is also reflected in the overall proportion of students who describe that experience in the 1998 survey (23%) and the 2010 survey (21%). Differences in the surveys’ results, however, emerge in relation to denomination. While the overall proportion of Protestant males (29% in 1998 and 28% in 2010) and Protestant females (39% in 1998 and 39% in 2010) reporting a religious experience remained static during this period, there was a decrease among

Catholic males (29% in 1998 and 21% in 2010) and Catholic females (38% in 1998 and 32% in 2010). Denominational differences were also evident among those who then went on to describe their religious experiences. The proportion of Protestant males (52% in 1998 and 59% in 2010) and Protestant females (57% in 1998 and 67% in 2010) responding positively to the invitation to describe their experience increased in the 2010 survey, while there was a corresponding decrease among Catholic males (80% in 1998 and 68% in 2010) and Catholic females (80% in 1998 and 79% in 2010) remained largely unchanged.

In terms of the modified Greer framework analysis, overall religious experiences falling into the categories of exams, death, answered prayer, conversion and miscellaneous were largely unchanged between 1998 and 2010. Some categories, however, showed an increase in frequency in 2010 such as God's presence (19% in 1998 and 26% in 2010), sickness (10% in 1998 and 18% in 2010), while others showed a decrease such as help and guidance (58% in 1998 and 26% in 2010) and difficulty in describing (6% in 1998 and <1% in 2010). When these results were broken down and compared by sex and denomination a more nuanced picture emerged with four aspects of particular note in relation to Catholic females primarily but also to Protestant males. First, while the prevalence of accounts referring to God's presence increased by varying degrees in 2010 for Protestant males, Protestant females and Catholic males, such accounts decreased slightly for Catholic females (18% in 1998 and 15% in 2010). Second, accounts relating to help and guidance decreased in 2010 most starkly among Catholic females (from 80% to 18%), followed by Protestant females (from 58% to 28%) and Catholic males (from 39% to 26%); Protestant males, however, showed an increase in help and guidance (from 27% to

41%). Third, although the overall figures for exams appear to remain largely similar in the two surveys, such accounts actually decrease for Protestant males and females and Catholic males but increase for Catholic females (from 16% in 1998 to 30% in 2010). Fourth, in a similar way, although the overall figures for answered prayer appear to remain largely similar in the two surveys, such accounts actually increase for Protestant males, Protestant females and Catholic males, but decrease for Catholic females (from 29% in 1998 to 19% in 2010).

### **Exemplifying the categories**

The exemplification of categories was based on the modified version of Greer's scheme, which includes God's presence, help and guidance, answered prayer, sickness, exams, death, conversion, difficulty in describing, and miscellaneous. The new categories of religious experience setting and religious experience frequency were also exemplified. Each cited example was identified by denomination and sex: Protestant male (Pm), Protestant female (Pf ), Catholic male (Cm), and Catholic female (Cf ).

#### *God's presence*

Religious experiences in the category of 'God's presence' were described in a number of ways, with some accounts focusing on either the regular/everyday or constant experience or reality of God's presence, and others on experiences at particularly stressful times of life. Specific examples of God's presence being felt at stressful times included the death or dying of a close relative and personal sickness, for example, and for one respondent, God was described as being 'there for me when needed'.



Where accounts included elaboration beyond a simple acknowledgement of the kind of experience (such as ‘felt his presence’), they formed two basic groupings: accounts relating the affective nature of the experience and accounts relating the physical nature of the experience, although it is recognised that the boundaries between the two groupings may often be indistinct. In terms of the affective nature of experiences, a range of observations were recorded, including feelings of: comfort, calm, peace, safety, strength and support, protection, confidence, courage, closeness, not being alone, guiding, relief and joy, warmth and happiness, weight being lifted, relief, joy and elation, and love.

Safety of his presence. (Cf)

I feel constantly comforted, I never feel alone even where no one is around. I can always close my eyes and feel God in me and talk to him. (Cm)

I felt him close one summer time. (Pf)

Feeling of joy and elation. (Pm)

There were also a few experiences that may be described as affective in nature such as two experiences concerning dreams, and experiences that were presented in an overtly charismatic way.

In a church appeal after a drama “heavens gates hells flame” I felt faint and felt myself move to the front in tears. (Pf)

God’s holy spirit fills me up and enters me. (Pf)

In terms of the physical nature of experiences, these included all accounts that were primarily concerned with the bodily senses. Many of these were extraordinary single experiences, and were most prevalent among Catholic males, followed by Protestant females.

It was like heat waves coming down on me and I felt like my body was shining. It's hard to explain. (Cm)

I was looking at the clouds one day and one formed into the face of God/Jesus. When I went to show someone it had disappeared. (Cm)

Seen numerous ghosts and flashes/dreams of what would happen a couple of days/weeks before occurred. (Cm)

Having communion I felt a hand on my shoulder telling me everything was going to be okay. (Pf)

At a team weekend we were praying and our hands began to sparkle like glitter which wouldn't wash off - the holy spirit. (Pf)

Although many of the experiences did not include details of location or activity at the time of the experience, where references were present, they included a range of religious associations, for example, church, retreat, prayer, mass/communion, conversion.

### *Help and guidance*

Many of the religious experiences in the 'help and guidance' category were general statements about either 'help' or 'guidance' given. Although the word 'help' appeared in nearly all accounts, 'guidance' or related words appeared in a very small number. A particular characteristic of the majority of accounts was that help was frequently related to 'difficult times', 'times of need', 'times of trouble', and other similar times; therefore, these religious experiences were most likely to refer to multiple experiences. There was a smaller distinctive group of experiences, however, that focused on the everyday or constant nature of God's help or guidance.

God has helped me through many bad times. (Cf)

Perhaps when I am desperate for help, it seems as though a greater entity helps me or guides me and helps me through struggles. (Cm)

Help through hard times. (Pf)

Helped me get through tough times. (Pm)

God is a constant source of help to me in all aspects of life. (Cf)

Although God is often cited directly as the source of help, in one case the help was received 'through friends and reading the bible'. The nature of the help given is also variously described as help 'making decisions', 'strength', 'clearing the head', 'encouragement', and 'signs', where this kind of additional information was offered. In the case of the latter example ('signs') a further element was presented in the explicit connection and tension existing between 'faith' and 'difficult times'.

God has helped me through some difficult times. When my faith became shaky. He sent signs just little things to show that he was still there for me and nothing is impossible with him. (Pf)

#### *Answered prayer*

Religious experiences falling into the category of 'answered prayer' were present in all categories of the analytic framework, although more frequently in some categories than in others, such as sickness. A religious experience understood to be 'answered prayer' was one in which it was explicitly stated or implied that a response had been received to prayer offered or to 'help' requested. These accounts related a specific instance or instances of answered prayer or a statement expressing belief in the efficacy of prayer.

When I have asked for God's help I feel that he has helped me and those I have prayed for. (Cf)

My brother had serious injuries and I prayed for him and he made a complete recovery. (Pm)

Prayer was answered by both physical change in circumstance and by affective change on the part of the respondent or another. There were some examples of strange

coincidences after prayer, such as one Catholic male who was praying while lonely and an old friend arrived at the door or the Protestant female who prayed for a pet and the following day a cat arrived at the door, visiting ever since. A couple of accounts were concerned with answered prayer in relation to sport, both personal participation and support of favourite teams. Less frequently, the nature of the answer to prayer is unspecified and stated simply as ‘answered my prayers’ or in one case, ‘answers my questions’.

Well after my granny died I prayed to God and my granny a lot and it helped me to take comfort in the fact that she would be in a better place. I felt reassurance from God. (Cf)

A lot of the time when I am having trouble in my life I pray and ask for help, God helps me. (Cm)

Was on a bad spell in my football. I prayed for a few nights and went on a good scoring run. (Cm)

One Catholic male prayed to angels, which raises the question of the direction of prayer when religious experiences do not explicitly identify whether the prayer was directed to God, a saint or another.

In total, over one quarter of religious experiences were perceived to be ‘answered prayer’, which points to a belief of many respondents in the efficacy of prayer. The presence of prayer in the religious experiences was, however, more extensive than this, with prayer (or pray, prayed) appearing 140 times and featuring in slightly under half of all the religious experience accounts (45%).

### *Sickness*

Religious experiences within the ‘sickness’ category were largely concerned with family members (aunts, grandparents, parents, nieces, and siblings) with a small

group of accounts relating to the respondents' themselves. In only four cases was the relationship of the respondent to the ill person non-specified.

Many of the responses in which details were offered of the religious experience emphasised the serious nature of a physical illness from which a person had recovered. This was illustrated through use of expressions such as 'very ill', 'close to death' or 'near death', for example, and the recovery was related as surprising or miraculous. In some of these cases, details were provided of the nature of the illness and made reference to the supporting opinion of health professionals concerning its seriousness. Perceiving the recovery from illness in terms of 'answered prayer' was also a discernable feature in many of these experiences. 'Answered prayer' in this context was usually presented in terms of prayer offered by the respondent but occasionally referred to a wider group, which was inferred by the use of the pronoun 'we'.

My mum fell ill and the doctors said that the odds were against her getting better, so we prayed and then the surgeon said she was going to be fine. (Cf)

Prayers to help my aunt who was described as 'near death' when she had a brain tumour. She made a full recovery. (Cm)

My niece was transferred for an emergency heart operation with the likeliness of passing away. I prayed and asked god to be with her, she recovered. (Pf)

My brother had serious injuries and I prayed for him and he made a complete recovery. (Pm)

A smaller group of religious experiences in this category was not primarily concerned about recovery from illness (and some made no reference to recovery at all), but rather focused on the religious experience being about helping people to cope,

watching over, or being with someone who is ill, and on occasion, enabling someone to live longer.

I felt God helped me to cope when my mother needed an operation to remove a brain tumour and I had to take care of the house and everything. (Cf)

I feel he is helping my granda who is suffering from cancer, he is watching over him. (Pf)

Where reports related to illness experienced by the respondents themselves, 'depression' or 'feeling down' featured as well as instances of physical illness. In the case of the former, help was given, God's presence was felt, and prayer had a positive effect (or for one respondent, faith). In the case of the latter, help to recover from a physical illness was given, and one respondent reported experiencing 'God's presence' after an operation. In addition, some examples of physical illness related to childhood recoveries from illness.

When I was suffering from depression I used to pray to God and ask for help and sure enough not long after I would feel strong again. (Cf)

During times when I am depressed I get a feeling of not being alone and someone cares. (Pf)

Last year I was ill and in hospital. The doctors couldn't come to a decision about what this was. However I prayed to God and about 3 months later I got better. (Cm)

After an operation and complications I suddenly became aware of his presence also day to day happenings. (Pf)

Helped me overcome my ear infection as a child. (Cm)

The 'sickness' category also included one example of how a respondent's prayer was related to the subsequent pregnancy of an aunt who had been told that she could 'never have children'.

### *Exams*

Most of the experiences within the 'exams' category were short and largely non-descriptive statements; for example, 'helped me through exams', or minor variations of this, was a frequently repeated phrase. Where further elaborations of the experience were provided, these referred to God's guiding action through exams, God's help in staying calm and focused, and God either providing or maintaining motivation in the preparation for exams. In a number of cases, these experiences were associated with the activity of prayer, and in one case the 'exam' experience was evidently part of a broader difficult and transformative experience for one Catholic male.

During my GCSE examinations, God guides me through them. Helping me stay calm and focused. (Cf)

In my 5<sup>th</sup> year at college things went down dramatically for me such as my parents separating and being told I wouldn't pass my GCSEs. I did lots of praying and got the required number of GCSEs as well as my parents coming back. (Cm)

I was stressed about exams and I went to a novena at a chapel and came out feeling clear headed. (Pf)

Although most of the responses appeared to be concerned with exams in a conventional school-related sense, a small group of responses extended the category to include job interviews and sport.

### *Death*

Responses in the 'death' category were most frequently concerned with deaths of close relatives (often a grandparent, but also siblings and cousins) and in one case a friend. Where additional information was provided, this often gave brief details of the effect of the experience, for example, 'help' was given, or a feeling of closeness to

God or presence, or in one case 'comfort'. On a few occasions, the religious experience was explicitly connected with prayer or a chapel.

I felt very close to God during the difficult time of my little sister dying. (Cf)

I felt God's presence when my grandfather died. (Cf)

Praying to him has helped me deal with death and helped me through difficult times throughout my life. (Cf)

A small group of close encounters with death were also included in this category, which focused on car accidents and a swimming pool accident. In addition, one respondent related a religious experience that centred on the activity of prayer and the prevention of a suicide attempt.

I was in a car crash and was told I shouldn't be alive but I walked away unharmed. (Pf)

I prayed that God would use me for something good, a few days later a friend tried to commit suicide. I felt something was wrong so I rang them, they said that God had answered their prayers to see if someone cared. (Pf)

### *Conversion*

Responses in the 'conversion' category were all descriptions of experiences from Protestant males and females. Some reports referred to a single personal experience relating to 'conversion', being 'born again' or being 'saved', while others described a more continuous religious experience since the 'conversion'. These experiences were mainly described as affective states using words such as 'peace', 'presence', 'warmth', and 'happiness'; however, one female respondent referred to a conversion experience that was accompanied by a physical sensation of something hitting her chest and entering her.

I am a born again Christian and a relationship with God is part of my daily life. (Pf)



When I surrendered my life to him I felt his presence and peace within me as I walk with him day by day. (Pf)

When I became a Christian I felt a feeling of warmth and happiness.  
(Pm)

Two respondents presented their conversion experiences entirely in terms that were articulated around the theological constructs of revelation, salvation, faith, repentance, and sin. In addition, there were two examples of cases where the religious experiences were connected to the role played by the respondent and God in the conversion of others.

My salvation God revealing himself to me. God granting me the gift of faith and repentance that he keeps with me to this day. (Pm)

When I was saved I felt the weight of sin was lifted. (Pm)

I prayed that a friend would be more open to the idea of God, the next week we met up to discuss religion. (Pf)

Leading somebody to faith I felt God's presence. He gave me the words to say and it was a special moment I won't forget. (Pf)

### *Difficulty in describing*

Only one Catholic male reported that it was 'hard to explain' his religious experience after describing its physical manifestations of heat and light.

### *Miscellaneous*

Responses included in the miscellaneous category may not be allocated to any of the other eight categories usually because of their general non-specific nature. These religious experiences are described as occurring during or in response to 'tough, stressful situations', 'tough times', 'difficult times' and 'in situations I am scared in'. Occasionally, a more specific description of a religious experience will be included, such as 'looked out for a close friend' and 'at a youth festival'.

### *Religious experience setting*

The substantial majority of the descriptions of religious experience gave few indications of the kind of physical setting in which the experience took place. The purpose of the ‘setting’ category, therefore, was to identify experiences where respondents considered a religious, church-related setting significant enough for comment in their description.

Of the few accounts identified in this category, a number of respondents commented that when the experience occurred, they were attending church, either a church event or service, and in one case specifically a communion service. One respondent, a Protestant female, connected a continuous experience of God during a difficult period in her life with a closer connection with God established through church attendance. Other examples in this category referred to an experience occurring at camp during group prayer and another reading scripture alone in a camp context. Some of the cases appeared to be denominationally-related, such as the Lourdes reference in relation to a Catholic experience and perhaps the ‘camp’ and Scripture Union references in relation to Protestant experiences.

Feeling the presence of the lord and holy spirit during and after worship. (Pm)

After going to Presbyterian church I felt more attached to God, when my grandad died I felt his presence continually. (Pf)

At a team weekend we were praying and our hands began to sparkle like glitter which wouldn’t wash off - the holy spirit. (Pf)

I collapsed in the middle of mass, all I remember is a blurry image and everything was white and shiny. (Cm)

I feel the holy spirit when I go to Lourdes. (Cf)

There were numerous examples, not included in this category, where religious experiences were explicitly related to religious practice; for example, with turning to God in prayer or asking for God's help. Although this significant block of experiences have not been included in this section, it should be noted that these also related to an active 'stepping into' a religious context in which a religious experience subsequently took place.

### *Religious experience frequency*

Responses categorised as *always or constant* in terms of frequency featured mainly in descriptions of religious experience in the 'God's presence' category and usually included inclusive descriptors such as 'always', 'constant', 'every', and 'all the time'. Protestant student responses, in addition, used 'daily' and 'everyday' to describe these experiences.

He is always there. (Pm)

I feel him walking with me everyday. (Pf)

Just a general feeling that there is always someone there and makes me who I am. (Cm)

I feel constantly comforted, I never feel alone even where is no one around. I can always close my eyes and feel God in me and talk to him. (Cm)

I believe that I have had experience with God everything he answers my prayer, for the health and safety of my family or anything else. God is always present. (Cf)

Descriptions of religious experiences categorised as *multiple* in terms of frequency were present in all categories of the analytic framework, apart from the 'difficulty in describing' category, which referred to a single experience. The multiple nature of the experiences were portrayed either in generic terms (for example, 'happy moments in my life') or in specific reference to two or more experiences (for example, 'help

during my exams, death of relative'). Some of these experiences were characterised by their ordinary, everydayness, while others were of a more extraordinary nature.

Its mostly the little things in life which others wouldn't notice like things which you never expect to work out but in the end they do. (Cf)

seen numerous ghosts and flashes/dreams of what would happen a couple of days/weeks before occurred. (Cm)

Reports of *single* religious experiences were evident in all the categories of the framework, and these were ascribed to either a specific period in the respondent's life or a discrete event.

I felt him close one summer time. (Pf)

I felt his presence after my granny died. (Cm)

I saw a white light in the kitchen. (Cf)

I was drowning in a pool on holiday, when a voice whispered in my ear to swim so I did and got back to knee deep water. (Cm)

## CONCLUSION

Two main conclusions emerge from the analyses of these data, which relate to the analytical frameworks employed and the results according to denomination (Protestant and Catholic) and according to survey year (1998 and 2010).

First, in terms of the analytical frameworks employed, the results show that the basic Greer categories are still able to reflect well the reported religious experiences of sixth-formers in Northern Ireland. In addition, it is clear that being able to place the experiences into more than one category has a demonstrable effect on the results, which was also the case in the 1998 survey (ap Sion, 2006). The results of the 2010

survey show that placing experiences into more than one category has an affect on both the hierarchical order of categories as well as numbers within specific categories. The most significant difference appears in the ‘answered prayer’ category. Here, when experiences are restricted in their allocation to just one category, only 7% are recognised as including answered prayer. However, when experiences can be placed in up to two categories, ‘answered prayer’ is seen to be an element of 23% of experiences. This is an important finding because it shows that around one quarter of all the described religious experiences are directly linked to God’s perceived response to personal prayer.

In the analysis, each religious experience was also examined for information relating to the setting for and the frequency of religious experience. In relation to setting, only 7% of responses were placed explicitly in a religious setting, and this was slightly higher for Protestant males (6%) and females (10%) than for Catholic males (5%) and females (4%). Although such identification of experiences is considered significant because it highlights the emphasis that respondents placed on an explicit religious context for the experience, the main weakness of this category is that it did not also include specific religious practice such a prayer or asking God for help, which would have given a broader appreciation of how religious setting may be understood in relation to religious experience. Future studies concerned with analysing the content of religious experiences would benefit from exploring this area in greater depth, recognising the qualitative distinctiveness of experiences where the respondents are consciously aware of actively bringing themselves into a religious ambit either through physical location or practice. In relation to frequency, the language used in the accounts of religious experience indicate that in all cases (apart from Catholic

males), religious experience was most often described as something that had happened more than once, and for a minority religious experience was something which was an everyday or ever-present reality (most often Protestant females, 10%). It is argued that this type of additional information provides a more nuanced understanding of the nature of religious experience among sixth formers in Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, and also captures the presence of that aspect of religious experience referred to by Hardy as 'a continuing feeling of a transcendental reality or of a divine presence' (Fox, 2014: 23) in contrast with single experiences.

Second, in terms of examining the results from the perspective of denomination (Protestant schools and Catholic schools) and survey year (1998 and 2010), the following differences may be discerned. Compared with Protestant males (32%), Protestant females (34%) and Catholic males (28%), Catholic females (15%) were less likely to describe their experience of God in terms of God's presence. In addition, if these figures are then compared with the results of the previous 1998 survey (ap Sion, 2006), it can be seen that experiences relating to God's presence are considerably more numerous in the current study with an increase most starkly seen in the experiences of Protestant males and Catholic males.

In the current study religious experiences falling into the help and guidance category were significantly fewer than in the 1998 survey, where help and guidance was the most frequently employed category. In the 2010 survey only 26% of experiences were related to help and guidance, and the figure for Catholic females (18%) was significantly lower than the other three groups. In the 1998 survey 58% of

experiences fell into the help and guidance category, with particularly high figures for Protestant females (58%) and Catholic females (80%).

The 'difficulty in describing' category was added to the eight Greer categories in the analysis of the 1998 data because of the high number of experiences falling into the miscellaneous category. However, the results of the 2010 survey show that less than 1% of experiences contained elements related to 'difficulty in describing', and the miscellaneous category remained low at 5%. This may indicate that those who chose to describe their religious experiences did not (at this level) consider it difficult in any particular way, unlike the 1998 survey.

There are, however, some results that remain broadly similar when the 1998 survey is compared with the 2010 survey. For example, religious experiences related to examination contexts continued to be higher in Catholic than in Protestant accounts, although with a sharp decrease in numbers for Protestant males and Protestant females in the 2010 survey. In the 1998 survey, examinations were a feature in the experiences of 14% of Protestant males, 14% of Protestant females, 28% of Catholic males and 16% of Catholic females. While in the 2010 survey, examinations were a feature in the experiences of 3% of Protestant males, 3% of Protestant females, 21% of Catholic males and 30% of Catholic females. A second example of results that have remained similar in the two surveys relates to the conversion category, which is employed by only Protestant males and Protestant females.

In conclusion, the data demonstrate that the question posed by Greer, together with the analytic frameworks proposed by Greer and developed by ap Sion, provide an

effective tool to penetrate behind the cultural significance of denominational identity in Northern Ireland to access the religious significance of this identity. Comparison of the findings generated by the research method among sixth-form students attending Catholic and Protestant schools in Northern Ireland in 1998 and 2010 offer a barometer of the changing face of the religious significance of denominational identity during the period of cultural transition. Further replication of the same research programme in 2020 is now needed to keep a clear record of the changing significance of religious identity in Northern Ireland.

## REFERENCES

- ap Sion, T. (2006). Looking for signs of the presence of God in Northern Ireland: Religious experience among Catholic and Protestant sixth-form pupils. *Archiv fur Religionspsychologie*, 38, 349-370.
- Barnes, L. P. (2005a). Was the Northern Ireland conflict religious? *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20, 53–67.
- Barnes, L. P. (2005b). Religion, education and conflict in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 26, 123–138.
- Beardsworth, T. (1977). *A sense of presence*. Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit.
- Cairns, E. & Darby, J. (1998). The conflict in Northern Ireland: Causes, consequences and controls. *American Psychologist*, 53, 754-760.
- Elkind, D. and Elkind, S. (1962). Varieties of religious experience in young adolescents. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2, 102–112.
- Farmer, L. J. (1992). Religious experience in childhood: A study of adult perspectives



on early spiritual awareness. *Religious Education*, 87, 259–268.

Fox, M. (2008). *Spiritual encounter with unusual light phenomena: Lightforms*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Fox, M. (2014). *The fifth love: Exploring accounts of the extraordinary*. Kidderminster: Spirit and Sage Ltd.

Francis, L.J. & Greer, J.E. (1993). The contribution of religious experience to Christian development: A study among fourth, fifth and sixth year pupils in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 15, 38-43.

Francis, L.J. & Greer, J.E. (1999). Religious experience and attitude toward Christianity among Protestant and Catholic adolescents in Northern Ireland. *Research in Education*, 61, 1-7.

Greer, J.E. (1981). Religious experience and religious education. *Search*, 4 (1), 23-34.

Greer, J.E. (1982). The religious experience of Northern Irish pupils. *The Irish Catechist*, 6 (2), 49-58.

Hardy, A. (1979). *The spiritual nature of man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hoge, D. R. and Smith, E. I. (1982). Normative and non-normative religious experience among high school youth. *Sociological Analysis*, 43, 69–82.

Miles, G. B. (1983). *A critical and experimental study of adolescents' attitudes to and understanding of transcendental experience*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leeds.

Mitchell, C. (2005). Behind the ethnic marker: Religion and social identification in Northern Ireland. *Sociology of Religion*, 66, 3-21.

Mitchell, C. (2005). *Religion, identity and politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of*

*belonging and belief*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Paffard, M. (1973). *Inglorious Wordsworth*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Robinson, E. (1977a). *The original vision*. Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit.

Robinson, E. (1977b). *This time-bound ladder*. Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit.

Robinson, E. (1978). *Living the questions*. Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit.

Robinson, E. and Jackson, M. (1987). *Religion and values at 16+*. Oxford: Alister Hardy Research Centre and CEM.

Scott, D. G. (2004). Retrospective spiritual narratives: Exploring recalled childhood and adolescent spiritual experiences. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 9, 67–79.

Tamminen, K. (1991). *Religious development in childhood and youth: An empirical study*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

**Table 1 Classification of described religious experience by sex and denomination phase 1: Greer (N= 311)**

Category	Protestant		Catholic	
	male %	female %	male %	female %
help and guidance	38	26	22	18
God's presence	24	25	22	13
sickness	9	19	14	18
exams	3	3	21	30
death	6	7	7	11
answered prayer	12	11	10	1
conversion	9	5	0	0
miscellaneous	0	3	3	9

**Table 2 Classification of described religious experience by sex and denomination phase 2: adapted framework (N= 311)**

Category	Protestant		Catholic	
	male %	female %	male %	female %
God's presence	32	34	28	15
help and guidance	41	28	26	18
answered prayer	18	27	26	19
sickness	9	19	14	22
exams	3	3	21	30
death	6	7	9	13
conversion	9	5	0	0
miscellaneous	0	3	3	9
difficulty in describing	0	0	2	0

**Table 3 Classification of religious experiences according to reported location and frequency (N= 311)**

Category	Protestant		Catholic	
	male %	female %	male %	female %
<i>Setting</i>				
religious	6	10	5	4
secular	94	90	95	96
<i>Frequency</i>				
constant / always	6	10	5	4
multiple	59	48	38	49
single	35	43	57	47